

Dr. Mark Jennings, Mark, Lecture 19, Mark 12:13-27, Conflict with Pharisees and Sadducees

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This is Dr. Mark Jennings in his teaching on the Gospel of Mark. This is session 19, Mark 12:13-37, Conflict with Pharisees and Sadducees.

Good morning or good afternoon.

We're keeping our working through Mark chapter 12 here. And remember, this is the last week of Jesus' life. And as we've been following his predictions, he knows this is his last week.

This is not something unknown to him. And he is, you know, this question, you know, you always ask if you only had a few days left, you know, what would you do with those days? And one of the things that Jesus is doing with those days is he keeps coming into the temple. And he is, as I've argued, he has cursed the temple and declared that its purposes are now being moved elsewhere, that it will be no more.

And he's been engaging with the leadership. The leadership has been coming as he's teaching in the temple. And really, he's been engaging with the Jerusalem leaders, which, if you think of the Sanhedrin as the backdrop for all this, were comprised of three groups: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes.

And what we're going to see as we work through is each of these groups come up and try to test and trap Jesus. And so, you have, like, the full picture coming into view. We've also established that Jesus has declared the religious leadership to, and associated them with wicked tenants who had rejected their care of the vineyard, had rejected the landowner of the vineyard, which in the Old Testament imagery would have been God, and even rejected the sun and killed the sun, which Jesus presents as himself.

So, this is the backdrop for all this. I'd like us to look at a particular controversy as we kind of work through this series of seven that has to deal with the Pharisees. We'll go with the Pharisees first and their question of taxation.

And then after that, I want us to discuss the Sadducees and then the scribes. You'll see this pattern that develops. Each begins with a teacher, and each deals with an issue of authority.

So, let's begin with verses 13 through 17. And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them or should we not? But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. And they brought one. And he said to them, whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's.

Jesus said to them, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. And they marveled at him. Of course, this is an unlikely alliance between the Pharisees and the Herodians.

This would have been two groups that, in most circumstances, would have been opposed to each other. The Herodians were the group that was in favor of maintaining the Herodian dynasty, which is a dynasty that began with Herod the Great, the Herod we know from the birth story of Jesus, that began with Herod the Great and then through his sons, you know, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip, so forth. They were aligned with Rome and were certainly trying to win Rome's favor.

This often led to great agricultural, architectural developments, and city developments. There was a Hellenistic process that they accepted and enjoyed. All the things the Pharisees stood against.

Of course, it doesn't surprise us now as a reader of Mark that the Pharisees and the Herodians are aligned because they aligned earlier on in Jesus' ministry in Galilee seeking to kill him. And of course, this is still the account here. And they begin with flattery.

And there's a lot of irony in chapter 12 all the way through Jesus' trial. A lot of irony where you have people saying things in insult or in falseness or in flattery that are actually true, even though they don't realize it. And so, they present him with we know you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion and are not swayed by appearances.

So, they're presenting them with this flattery of we know that you will answer us honestly and that you are such a true teacher and you do desire the things of God. But Jesus says, knowing their hypocrisy, and of course, hypocrisy, we've talked about this before, is one of Jesus' frequent insults to the religious leaders. He would call them hypocrites.

It had the idea that if you trace the Greek word back, it actually sort of began as a term for an actor, one who performed on a stage for applause. And so, it carries even

still the idea of one pretending to be something that they are not. And so here, they're pretending to think Jesus is a good teacher and wanting to have his answer, but he knows that their true intent is to trap him and to test him.

But he engaged, Jesus is very active. He doesn't deny it there. He engages the question.

And he asks them to bring Denarius to them. Now, the question of paying taxes to Caesar was not an uncommon question or an unexpected question to be asked in this context, especially in Judea, where the money went directly to Rome, whereas in Galilee, it would be funneled to Rome through Herod Antipas. Of course, the tax in question is a poll tax.

The Denarius was a Roman silver coin, at this time, would have on one side the bust of Tiberius Caesar with an abbreviation that stood for an inscription that would read Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus. So, there was a semi-divine quality understood that was being presented to Tiberius, a son of God quality as well. Then, on the other side would be the image of Tiberius' mother, Livia, with an inscription indicating that she was a high priest.

So, in other words, the coin, it's not surprising that this question comes up because even Caesar himself, as Denarius would indicate, had this imperial cult and this semi-divine activity. Of course, the question seemingly is a brilliant question. Either Jesus might be forced to compromise in a way that will discredit him, in other words, affirm the pain of money to a figure presenting himself as in a divine blasphemous sort of way, or refuse and say no taxes should be paid, thus putting him in the league of potential revolutionaries that might allow for his arrest.

Jesus asks for a coin, and I always find it amusing that he doesn't have one of these coins, but everyone else seems to. So, this sort of coin in question, Jesus doesn't have. He needs one of them to provide it, and they do have it.

They do have coins that are useful and needed to pay taxes. And he asks whose image is on it, and then the response is that it's Caesar's, whose likeness and inscription is this. They said Caesar's.

Now, the answer that Jesus gives here is to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; on one level, Jesus acknowledges the right of government, that there are governments and monetary systems that exist, and that there is an authority implied. But even further, the statement, and to God, the things that are God, steps it even more. Of course, it puts God's sovereignty over all things, which would include human governments, implying that even the ultimate rule, the ultimate sovereignty of God, is something that even human governments are under.

But it's hard to miss the irony that, on the one hand, the coin bears Caesar's image, but Caesar as a human bears the image of God, this idea that human, whose image is actually here, to some extent, man is made in God's image. However, that is sort of understood; I think there's almost a subtle indication that everything is done in service to God. Even service to government is a service to God, and God allows for the government to exist and to exert authority.

And so, he finds a way in his answer of, one, steering clear of revolution against Caesar and a declaration of no taxes, but without denying this sovereign authority of God over all things and ultimate service being done to him. And so, naturally, of course, they marvel at him. The Pharisees could hardly protest his claim to render to God all that belongs to God, and Herodians could hardly protest the claim to render to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar.

So, these two parties that were, in essence, at odds, the Pharisees and Herodians, would find in Jesus' response something that would be hard for them to disagree with. So, after the Pharisees, though, come this next group, a group that we haven't seen as much, and that is the Sadducees. So, we had the test of the Pharisees, and now we have the test of the Sadducees in verses 18 through 27.

I'll read this for you, and then we'll think through what is happening here. And Sadducees came to him, who say, there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.

There were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and when he died, left no offspring. The second took her and died, leaving no offspring.

And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all, the woman also died.

In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife. Jesus said to them, Is this not the reason you are wrong? Because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.

Now, the Sadducees are seeking here to discredit Jesus' belief in the resurrection. This is something, as the text says, the Sadducees as a group denied, and they need

to be sure the resurrection is not heavily present in the Old Testament. It's foreshadowed, of course, Isaiah 26:19, you see Ezekiel 7, Daniel 12, Psalms 73, but there's not a heavy statement about the resurrection in the Old Testament.

Now, the Sadducees were a religious as well as political party. They stood opposite sides with the Pharisees, and their origin, we think, probably occurred some time during the rise of the Hasmonean dynasty, with the success of the Maccabean Revolt and the Hasmonean rule and the machinations that sort of took place during then. It's when we see the Pharisees seem to show up, and we think that might be one of the Sadducees.

We don't know a lot about this group, largely because this group doesn't seem to continue on after the fall of the temple. Indeed, their power was largely attached to the authority of Jerusalem. Now, the Sadducees recognize only the Pentateuch.

Now, recall what I just said about the resurrection is hinted at, foreshadowed, somewhat more explicitly than others, in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Psalms. None of those are the five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And the Sadducees recognized only the Pentateuch as scriptural authority, and so they denied the resurrection.

They were typically associated with the priestly leadership, the upper class. The reason we haven't had a lot of interaction with them up to this point is that they were primarily in Jerusalem. They were largely located, and their influence was in the holy city.

So, whereas the Pharisees were out and dispersed in the countryside, the Sadducees were not. Thus, Jesus hasn't had as many interactions with them up to this point. Also, since they denied the prophets as scriptural, they had little to do with Messianic claims.

The idea of a Messiah to come, a future Messiah, etc., was something that just wasn't of that importance to them. So, their alignment also with political establishments such as Rome was not considered as problematic because they weren't looking for any Messiah. Of course, when the Temple fell, their influence waned.

In our story, though, they are aligned with the Pharisees and have the same goal in terms of discrediting Jesus. Now, the story, this question, this hypothetical they put in place, concerns the custom of levirate marriage, or brother-in-law marriage, if you will, which required the idea, stems from the Pentateuch, that if a brother is deceased, or if a man deceased, the brother of the deceased man could marry his brother's widow, was to marry his brother's widow and raise those children as his

heirs. Now, understand, this was not, this practice of levirate marriage was not to allow polygamy.

This purpose was not so someone could have more than one wife, but really was allowed to protect the property of the family and to protect the widow. It was put in place so when if the man died, the widow, who is now vulnerable, but who had, you know, potentially there was property, heirs, children, wealth that had been accumulated, that that wouldn't somehow go outside of the family, that she would be able to fall under the protection, and her sons would then become heirs, you know, of their uncle, and the property would be protected. So, it was a stipulation put in place to protect in these situations, and so this is where this idea comes from.

And so they're asking, so assuming levirate marriage, and you have a woman who ends up being married to seven brothers before it's done, and doesn't have kids with any of them, so that's not allowing any particular man to have priority because there was family lineage, what happens in the resurrection? And remember, the Sadducees deny the resurrection, so they do not really want to know what happens in the resurrection. They want, in their intent, to show the absurdity of resurrection because their assumption is that resurrection life is basically the continuation of the present life. I mean, so what they assume, what when people are teaching about resurrected life, which was pretty similar to what in some sense resurrected life was understood, would just be the continuation of what is going on.

So here we have Jesus' response, and I think it's fascinating that he doesn't argue on a technical ground. He doesn't argue and actually answers the question of who has the right in the levirate marriage, who, by understanding this process, would be considered the first primary husband by order or anything like that. He accuses them of not knowing scripture.

Now, it is no surprise that he accuses them of not knowing scripture because whenever Jesus has been responding to religious leaders, he usually starts with, have you not read? Do you not understand? And it's an accusation, but one might have expected here that he would reference a scripture passage that deals with resurrection, but he doesn't. He, in almost, not just almost, in brilliant fashion, he keeps the scriptural discussion in the books that the Sadducees recognize. The Sadducees only recognize the Pentateuch.

So instead of talking about the resurrection by going to what the prophets say, or something like that, instead of trying to validate the resurrection, which the Sadducees are trying to invalidate, he goes to the heart of the Pentateuch itself. Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.

So, I think it's one, it's just, you just marvel at Jesus using just the Pentateuch to talk about the resurrection, and the idea here is that God has made a covenant with these men and that God is continuing to keep that covenant, but a covenant only is in place with the living, not with the dead. And so, there's this idea that God has made a covenant with those who, and continues with those who are living. And he also, though, accuses them of being ignorant of the power of God.

Notice what he says, you know, you do not understand the scriptures, nor the power of God. So, they didn't understand the Pentateuch, even the argument, even the Pentateuch speaks of the resurrection, but they also miss the power of God. For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given a marriage, but are like angels of heaven.

In other words, he's saying the resurrection life is not simply the continuation of present existence, that the resurrection life is a different quality of life, a different nature of life, where the question of marriage isn't even one that is asked, you know because their existence is different. And so, here we have so far in these controversies, first the Pharisees and Herodians, and in Jesus' answer, he gives something that the Pharisees can't deny, and he gives to the Herodians something that the Herodians can't deny. And here with the Sadducees, he argues from their only text that they affirm as scripture, you know, and they can't deny that that's what the text says.

And so, his authority in these engagements is something, you know, quite marvelous. Indeed, that's what the scribe that we're going to talk about next in verses 28 through 34; that's what instigates his very own response. And so, let's look at 28 through 34.

Now, keep in mind we've been talking about Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes as the three main components of the Sanhedrin. Now, the Pharisees came to test, the Sadducees came to test, but in this picture of this particular scribe, you would expect that the scribes would also seek to trap Jesus. But what we're going to have here is actually a very amicable conversation between this scribe and Jesus.

Now, this should not be seen as this particular scribe representing the whole group, for there are actually some harsh statements that are going to be made about scribes later on in chapter 12. And it's also worth noting this isn't a group that comes to Jesus, like the Pharisees and Herodians were a group, the Sadducees were a group, this is a particular scribe, an individual. And that's why I think that also shows that it's different.

But let's look at 28 through 34 here. And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he was referring to the responses to the Pharisees and the Sadducees; he's been witnessing this, and

asked him which commandment is the most important of all? Now, this question of which is the most important is really more like the idea of which one is incumbent on everyone, which one supersedes the other commandments, which is the heaviest commandment, if you will, that informs the other commandments. This heavy and light idea is not in the sense of which one you can do without and which one you can do, but which one, in terms of understanding the rest of Torah, the rest of the law, is the hermeneutical key.

And this type of question about what's the heaviest of commandments, what's the commandment that informs all, is not an uncommon question. Hillel, who we referenced earlier in our discussion on divorce, represented different one of the parties of rabbis, roughly contemporary with Jesus. He's asked this question for a summary of the law, and he responded with what really is a negative version of what we would call the golden rule. He says, what you would not want done to you, do not do to your neighbor.

This is the entire Torah, everything else is interpretation. Another rabbi, Rabbi Akiba, in 135 AD, said the essence of Torah was you shall love your neighbor as yourself, Leviticus 19.8, which comes up here. So in other words, this is not an uncommon question.

Jesus gives his own answer to this question: what is the heaviest, that is, what is the commandment that interprets all the others? What is the most important and incumbent on all? And he ended with Deuteronomy 6:4 and 5. Jesus answered, the most important is "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." So, he begins with what is known as the Shema, the idea of to hear, and notice it starts with hear, O Israel.

It was something that was probably cited morning and evening. Interesting to note, you know, with the Shema, which would have been one of the core confessions of the full devotion to God, notice that there if you look at the Deuteronomy text, it's actually a three-fold response, heart, soul, and strength, whereas Jesus gives a four-fold response, you know, heart, soul, mind, and strength. Now, there's been a lot of ink that has been spilled over that, and in some sense, I think unnecessarily so.

For example, I do not think this is indicative of the age and the time at where now mind has started to rise, and Jesus is wanting to include that. I also don't think it's indicative of the fact that Jesus didn't know his Bible, right, which is sometimes said. Rather, they're both saying the same thing.

Now, in Deuteronomy, the whole person, right, could be captured by heart, soul, and strength, and in the heart was also kind of the mind-thinking capacity as well. There wasn't that separation between, you know, the mind and the heart. Now, by the time you're in your first century, there had been some sort of reconsideration of

what constituted the whole person, so now you had, you know, with what Jesus says, you know, here, you know, heart, soul, mind, and strength, and what Jesus is reflecting here is not an addition to the Shema, but still the same essence of the whole person.

You will love the Lord your God with your whole person, with every aspect of it. And then he gives a second, and you shall love the Lord your God. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no other commandment greater than these. So, he adds Leviticus passage to it. Now, the addition of Leviticus to the Shema shows that for Jesus, the two together reveal the will of God.

The implication of the order is that the love of neighbor is the result of a full love of God, that love of God bears out in the command to love of neighbor. And so when the two greatest, you know, what is the summary, what is the two greatest commandments, you know, what Jesus is saying is the entire teaching of the will of God can be summarized in love the Lord your God fully in the Shema, and love your neighbor as yourself. The scribe, Elias, is pleased with this.

The scribe said, you are right, teacher, which I think is a very interesting statement. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him, and to love him with all the heart, and all the understanding, with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices, which picks up, you know, what you have here. The scribe, there's a lot of scripture that the scribe is using in his response.

He's adding text. He's affirming what Jesus is saying, but included in his response are echoes of Deuteronomy 4:35, 6:4, Leviticus 19:18, 1 Samuel 5:22, Isaiah 45:21, Hosea 6:6, and this idea that what God desires is not sacrifice, but, you know, obedience, and devotion, and love of neighbor. And, of course, this is in the context of the temple that all of this is occurring to, which had become this great sacrificial entity instead of a place of devotion to God and love of neighbor.

And then Jesus responded then, and when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, so what did the scribe do right? He affirmed that Jesus' statement was true, and then supported it with even other evidence to say it. And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

That's a fascinating statement that Jesus makes, that you are not far from the kingdom of God. Now, keep in mind that Jesus has been proclaiming the kingdom of God has drawn near in his person, with the accompanying commands to repent and believe. And so this statement of the scribe, that if the scribe is getting this idea, and

maybe even this progressive idea, if you will, of understanding that the will of God is that God's greatest command is to love God fully, and then express that love and love of neighbor, that that pairing and understanding of scripture, if you understand the Old Testament that way, that should direct you to then be able to understand what Jesus is doing, which is just full devotion to God, played out in a sacrificial love, fully for everyone.

And so this also carries the idea of how the entire Old Testament in doing this, by connecting with the kingdom of God, which Jesus has connected with himself, that he's also saying that the entire Old Testament, summarized in those two commandments, points towards what is happening in that moment, the arrival of Jesus and the salvific plan of God. So, it's a fascinating and very amicable statement and exchange. And I think it's also encouraging to see that it wasn't all the scribes, that all the Pharisees weren't against him, all the scribes weren't against him, that there were people who were generally seeking and discerning something in Jesus.

We even, of course, saw that elsewhere with other people who would come, religious leaders who would come to Jesus and ask questions. I want to kind of keep moving through here to verses 35 through 37, and this will likely, you know, where we'll get to this time. This is the sixth in the series of controversies.

Here, of course, the scribes are put in a lesser view, read the verses, and then look at them. And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, how can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself and the Holy Spirit declared, the Lord said to my right, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, and I'll put your enemies under your feet. David himself calls him Lord, so how is he his son? And the great throng heard him gladly.

Jesus is in the temple, he's teaching, and he raises the question regarding the Davidic ancestry and Messianic expectations. Of course, we've been talking about the Messianic expectation all along, and it stems from 2 Samuel 7, 11 through 6, where Nathan declares that God would raise up a Messianic king in David's line, and this idea gets picked up in the prophets. This is what we've been talking about.

And here, notice, they had gone silent. They weren't asking him any more questions, but that doesn't mean Jesus has no more to say. He then begins, and he puts forth a question of inserting: How is it that the scribes argue something? He's putting forth this problem. The problem is that David himself calls this figure Lord, who is, you know, by being in the Davidic line, the Messiah to come would have been David's son, and it's putting it on the question of how is it possible that King David would say to one of his offspring, Lord.

And he quotes Psalm 110:1, which is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. This is quoted more times than any other passage. It's consistently used to affirm Jesus and his Messianic identity.

Now, Jesus has already implicitly accepted the son of David from blind Bartimaeus. He didn't correct blind Bartimaeus when he called him the son of David. So now this issue is sort of coming full circle.

But fascinating, he puts forth the problem. He puts forth the problem, how is it possible? Yet he doesn't answer it. He doesn't.

David calls himself Lord, so how is he his son? It's fascinating, Jesus actually doesn't, we don't have Jesus answer in this. He just said, he puts forth the problem. Of course, as a reader of Mark, we are now ready to answer that question.

We know from the opening to the baptism to the transfiguration that it's because the son of David is none other than the Son of God. And so even in this phrasing, we find ourselves ready to affirm the answer to the problem that Jesus has given here. And the crowds enjoy.

We'll continue working through the Gospel of Mark when we gather again. Thank you.

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